

THE NICK THIMMESCH COLUMN

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THE CASEY ERA AT THE CIA

By Nick Thimmesch

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WASHINGTON -- There he is, William Joseph Casey, head of the world's most expensive intelligence agency, a man who mutters out of the side of his mouth like W.C. Fields, is often called an Irish street pug and yet is grudgingly credited with having restored a sick CIA to health.

Casey, nearly 72, is irascible, impatient, and so intent on his own goals, that he couldn't care less what Congress or the press think of him. In fact, he shows rich disdain for both of those powerful Washington institutions. Casey might reason that he didn't have to heed them when he was a crack intelligence agent in World War II, so why should he now?

When Barry Goldwater was chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Casey rankled him so that

Goldwater says, "There were days when I would like to have kicked his butt. Still, Casey has done an outstanding job. Everywhere I go in the world, intelligence people are very laudatory of him. He has put the team together. Today, we have people standing in line, wanting to go to work for the CIA."

Casey admits he has problems with Congress but claims they are rooted in the administration's Central American policy, and "are largely political." His explanations of the CIA's mining of Nicaraguan waters was so laced with memory lapses and obfuscations that exasperated senators sputtered that Casey had lost all credibility. Democrat Pat Moynihan huffily threatened to quit the committee. Casey wasn't bothered.

One consequence is that the Senate now seems ready to join the House in stopping the administration's program of aiding anti-government rebels (Contras) in Nicaragua.

As for the press, Casey decided early on that it was a waste of time for CIA analysts to brief reporters, and besides, the media had no business

at the CIA anyway. "We don't have the resources for that," Casey says. "Hell, even the trade magazines were trying to get in."

Thwarted by Casey, reporters pursue the CIA story anyway, and many are surprised to get good reports.

Casey has wangled whopping increases in the CIA budget, now estimated at \$2 billion. "National Estimates (regional world studies)," prepared from mountains of reports and research, had fallen to 12 a year in the Seventies. Regarded by intelligence professionals as "our reason for being," the number has climbed to about 60 a year under Casey.

While Casey argues that there were more covert operations in the Carter years than now, a follow-up question gets him to admit that "ours are far bigger and more intense." In a word, CIA agents are once again all over the world, in force, trying to plumb the intent of certain nations, and not satisfied, as Casey's predecessor, Adm. Stansfield Turner was, to chiefly rely on electronic monitoring.

Once, the CIA not only had trouble getting recruits, it was hooted and picketed off campuses. Today, the CIA is swamped with applications and is hiring about 1,500 people a year. Its staff is now an estimated 18,000. "We have good people," Casey says, "but we need more. On pay, we can't compete with industry for the best graduates. But we're getting there. Midwesterners are good. There is still some anti-CIA feeling in the East, particularly in the Ivy League."

More importantly, the CIA can rightfully claim to be at least equal to the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti -- the KGB. The Soviets have more agents and they work in "open" societies like the U.S. Moreover, the KGB has a 250,000-man uniformed border force. But the CIA enjoys a vast technological superiority which offsets the disadvantages of its agents being required to operate in "closed" societies. Finally, CIA people are more open minded and more imaginative than the Soviets. KGB agents defect. CIA agents don't.

Casey knows the difference between an open

and closed society, but that doesn't mean that he likes it. He doesn't volunteer information to questioning congressmen. One senator cracked: "Casey wouldn't tell you if your coat was on fire unless you asked him."

But Casey's CIA evidently has scored enough successes that even his congressional critics lay off. Sen. Goldwater says: "They have to realize that Frank Church damn near destroyed the CIA in the Seventies. Turner did the best he could, but didn't understand the job. Casey has done an outstanding job, and soon, our intelligence community will be the world's best."

The CIA is "old style" again, to the despair of civil libertarians who don't like it spying on Americans overseas, doing covert actions on foreigners in the U.S., and even opening mail. But Casey, who invariably mutters and mumbles, is blessed with a penetrating mind and has muddled through and gotten his way. He is a financial buccaneer worth \$10 million, an accomplished author, and a survivor of many charges of scandal. He just keeps going and, if pushed, pushes

back.

Casey won't be dislodged. President Reagan likes his work. So do the CIA professionals. "I'll stay as long as I'm needed," he told me in his office, looking sideways as usual. "I'll stick with him as long as he wants me," he added, speaking of the president, as maybe Casey Stengel would have.

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